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4 October 2018

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Dear David

Monitoring visit of Surrey local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Surrey children's services on 11 and 12 September 2018. The visit was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in May 2018. The inspectors were Nick Stacey, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Steve Lowe, Her Majesty's Inspector Designate.

The local authority is not yet making sufficient progress in improving services for its children and young people in the areas addressed during the visit.

Areas covered by the visit

During this initial visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made for children who are the subjects of child in need and child protection plans. Inspectors evaluated the quality of decision-making for starting and ending plans. Close attention was paid to the quality and impact of plans in informing purposeful and timely work to reduce safeguarding concerns and improve children's circumstances. Relevant recommendations of the recent inspection informed the visit's focus.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, supervision notes and discussions with social workers, family support workers and child protection conference chairs. Information provided by managers was considered, alongside the views of senior managers.

Overview

Too many children continue to be removed from child protection plans before there is substantial evidence that the risks they are facing have reduced or their circumstances have improved. This results in many children and families being placed on a plan for subsequent episodes. Some very young children have been the subject of repeated child protection and child in need plans. This trend of cyclical 'start again' social work is compounded by a complex service structure, requiring

numerous handover points and changes of social worker as children travel through the statutory social work system.

Many social workers, frontline managers, child protection conference chairs and partner agencies have insufficient knowledge and understanding of the impact of cumulative neglect, exposure to domestic abuse and other adult difficulties on children. Typically, if small improvements are achieved and the frequency of incident reports declines, children are 'stepped down' from plans too quickly, and 'stepped up' again when concerns resurface.

A new, highly experienced senior management team, formed since the inspection, understands the scale of poor practice and outcomes for these highly vulnerable children. A systemic review of the practice system and service structure is in progress. It is rightly recognised that measures to achieve wide scale practice improvements will take time to implement, and senior leaders advised inspectors that the standard of interventions and outcomes for children considered during the visit was unlikely to have significantly changed since the inspection.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, some limited, very recent, areas of stronger practice were identified, including an emerging increased understanding of the damaging effects on children experiencing neglect and domestic abuse. Some sensitive and thoughtful work was seen with older children affected by exploitation in their local communities. Morale in the two area offices visited was positive and nearly all social workers seen were permanent employees who are committed to remain working in Surrey. Social workers are both aware of and enthused by the proposed practice improvements and they welcome the planned introduction of a 'family resilience' model. This model is planned to be delivered in conjunction with streamlined service structures, in order to reduce changes of social worker, and smaller caseloads, in order to enable evidence-based direct work with children and their adult carers in smaller teams.

Case supervision is regularly provided to social workers by their immediate line managers, and most social workers value the support and guidance provided. Urgent child protection concerns are identified and addressed quickly, and no children were identified as being at immediate risk of serious and imminent harm during the visit. Close attention to regularly reviewing and 'rescaling' the risks and needs facing children on statutory plans was evident. The use and effectiveness of a well-established practice model used by case supervisors is inconsistent. Where concerns about children's exposure to neglect, domestic abuse and other damaging adult habits and behaviours are longstanding and chronic, there is a lack of urgency in increasing the pace of interventions, including by escalating the case to legal planning meetings. A pattern of the same actions from one supervision session to the next was apparent in many cases seen. Little guidance is provided for social workers by their supervisors on how to approach and carry out direct work with children, particularly when they live in larger families where their brothers and sisters are present on home visits, often in busy, chaotic households. Managers do

not attend child in need review meetings and this is a missed opportunity for them to assess the impact and progress of work for children.

In a minority of cases seen during the visit, managers had taken considered decisions to hold a legal planning meeting to evaluate whether to introduce public law outline (PLO) pre-proceedings work, or to enter proceedings immediately based on careful reviews of the accumulating evidence of continuing harm and neglect to children. However, this is the exception rather than established practice. In other cases, the PLO or care proceedings were only instigated when a critical event or notification triggered this level of response for children.

In too many cases, the impact on children of very poor school attendance over long periods is not fully recognised. Inspectors also saw cases where poor, unpredictable care and routines at home, global development delay, compounded by poor parenting, and failure by parents to ensure that their children attend vital medical appointments were not consistently understood. When a parent engages with a service, such as substance misuse treatment or a domestic abuse awareness programme, this is often regarded as significant progress rather than encouraging evidence of early engagement. Similarly, when children's attendance at school marginally improves, and the number of police incident reports concerning domestic abuse reduces, these small measures of early progress can result in children being prematurely removed from plans.

Increasing recognition of the need to undertake risk assessments on absent or avoidant male partners and fathers who are abusive and violent was seen, but this is not consistently evident. This commonly results in women bearing the primary responsibility for safety plans for their children when they are often the subjects of emotional control and coercion and face risks of further physical assault. Not enough effort is made to engage men, particularly those who have not been convicted, in perpetrator programmes or to consider their offending histories with the police and probation services, in order to inform risk assessments of their potential to further harm children.

Few examples were seen of dynamic, purposeful inter-agency work. Strategy meetings are rarely attended by agencies other than the police and social care. When a school or health visitor is the source of a possible child protection concern requiring a strategy meeting, they often do not attend the meeting to inform the initial risk assessment and investigation plan. Review meetings for child in need plans are regularly held, but they are not routinely attended by all the involved agencies to provide a full, rounded evaluation of progress, measured against the main objectives of the plan. Child protection core groups are better attended, and in some cases are instrumental in developing and adapting the plan as work with the family evolves.

Child protection and child in need plans do not consistently explain what needs to be done, and in what order of priority, with sufficient clarity. The use of a well-established practice model in devising child protection plans can overcomplicate rather than simplify the core plan. The volume of actions and requirements for

parents and social workers are often too onerous and unrealistic. It is unclear why child protection conference chairs continue to remove too many children from plans prematurely before evidence of sustained improvements is apparent. Senior managers are keenly aware of this practice and intend to improve both the standard of child protection conference chairing and plans.

Some children experience delays in being 'stepped up' from lengthy and repeated periods of early help to statutory child in need or protection plans. Thresholds for escalating more serious concerns about children's welfare seen during the visit were appropriate, but some were long overdue. Family group conferences or network meetings are not held soon enough to strengthen informal networks of support. They are typically held when difficulties have become very serious, and entering the PLO pre-proceedings phase is being considered. Data provided by the local authority indicates that the majority of families entering the PLO pre-proceedings stage are managed within the required 12-week period, before either entering care proceedings or diversion from them.

Social workers are thinking more about how to plan and conduct direct work with children. The input of family support workers in helping social workers with direct work with both children and their adult carers is valuable. Highly sensitive, balanced and well-informed work provided by specialist workers was seen with older children experiencing exploitation. This was helping young people to understand the level of risk they were exposing themselves to and helping them to exit from gang control through carefully crafted approaches. Interactive, direct work tools are commonly used with children to understand their experiences and views, but the level of depth and skill demonstrated in using these varies widely. The ability of workers to build continuous, constructive relationships with children and parents is disrupted by frequent team handover points and changes of social worker. This inevitably limits the level of commitment children, families and social workers give to building trusting relationships.

Nearly half of children who are subjects of children in need plans are not visited within the local authority's prescribed timescales. This is likely to be a major contributory factor to drift and delay in improving children's outcomes. The impact of help for many children on these plans for longer periods is questionable. Some plans appear to run out of steam and are closed or stepped down. Alternatively, some children's circumstances deteriorate, and they are escalated to child protection plans.

Senior managers have very recently introduced a new auditing framework and team. Inspectors saw moderated audits, indicating that the audit team has an assured grasp of good practice standards. This is less evident at first line management level. Practice audits were rated less positively by moderators. Inspectors agreed with the moderators' adjustments. The new senior management team have ambitious, credible plans for wholesale and systemic improvement of the standards of social work practice for children. This involves leaders and managers from other local authorities helping design improvements to the multi-agency safeguarding hub, early help provision and a service structure that minimises case handover points and

changes of social worker. A time-limited improvement board was scheduled to have the first meeting shortly after the visit. The director of children's services intends for practice standards and better outcomes for children to be measured and improved within newly developing strategic partnerships and scrutiny arrangements when the improvement board concludes. A new practice model, with a core element of focusing on addressing entrenched adult difficulties, will be introduced alongside smaller teams and social worker caseloads. These changes are at an early stage, and a detailed, phased implementation plan is keenly awaited by social workers.

Morale among social workers is positive. There is a strong cohort of new social workers who have completed their first year in practice in Surrey's social work academy. They highly valued their introductory year and felt well prepared for subsequent practice in the local authority. Nearly all of the social workers seen during the visit were permanent social workers, many of whom were experienced and had worked in the local authority for substantial periods of time. Social workers were very interested in and aware of the improvement plans, and are hopeful that this will enable them to undertake better direct work with highly vulnerable children and their carers

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Nick Stacey
Her Majesty's Inspector

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